# Dozens shot dead in Yemen protest

##### The Age

##### Laura Kasinof and Robert Worth, Sanaa

March 20, 2011

YEMEN'S pro-democracy protests have exploded into violence as government supporters opened fire on demonstrators in the capital, killing at least 45 people and wounding more than 200.

The bloodshed failed to disperse an angry throng of tens of thousands of protesters, the largest protest seen so far in a month of demonstrations calling for the ouster of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Mr Saleh declared a state of emergency shortly after Friday's shootings, denying security forces had been involved and promising a full investigation.

The state news agency said the state of emergency would last 30 days.

The shootings seemed certain to provoke more violence in Yemen's tribal society, and analysts said they could further weaken Mr Saleh.

Although the US has voiced sympathy for pro-democracy protesters in Yemen and elsewhere in the Arab world, it has special concerns about the stability of Yemen, a strife-torn country that is home to one of al-Qaeda's most active branches and has been a US ally, and a major recipient of military aid, in the fight against terrorism.

Protesters have been killed in recent weeks, but Friday's violence dwarfed that of earlier clashes. It began almost immediately after the protesters' noon prayers, conducted in the street by thousands. As the protesters rose from prayer, government supporters in plain clothes opened fire from rooftops and windows on parts of the crowd, while security forces fired guns and a water cannon.

Some of the men in the protest raided buildings where gunmen had been seen, catching several men accused of being snipers, dragging them into the streets and beating them. In the apartment of one suspect, protesters said they found military uniforms and Defence Ministry identification.

But in the chaos of the day and given the fact that most Yemenis are armed, it was not clear how the violence began or whether the men who fired on the crowd acted on their own or as proxies for Mr Saleh's security forces. If the government was responsible, it would appear to have taken up the same strategy that Libya and Bahrain followed last week, using overwhelming force against protesters.

At a news conference in Sanaa, Mr Saleh claimed the clashes were between ''citizens and demonstrators'' and that ''the police were not present and did not open fire''.

President Barak Obama condemned the violence and called on Mr Saleh to keep his public pledge to allow demonstrations to take place peacefully.

''Those responsible for today's violence must be held accountable,'' he said.

NEW YORK TIMES, AFP